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Slow and Steady

Acts 9:1-20

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This morning's scripture is a story about someone coming to know Jesus. Coming to Jesus is what we are about here -we come to Jesus and then grow in Jesus, seeking to be whole people, people that are not broken any longer, and at the same time, people who are involved in God's many projects, people who are seeking to please our Lord and Savior as we move toward personal wholeness.

We can learn some things from the passage this morning, but we also need to recognize up front that Paul's story may not be our story .Some of us may have had dramatic experiences in coming to Jesus, while others of us may not have been on the road to Damascus when a blinding flash of God-activity got our attention. Some of us may have grown up in homes where people knew Jesus and, even better, modeled what it means to be a Jesus person. I say all this because it's possible for some people to think they are second class citizens in the kingdom of God if they have not had a voice from heaven or cannot remember the exact beginning of their spiritual journey.

The important question is rarely 'when' did you become a Christian. It may be nice to know. And it's important in the sense that anyone who is a Christian has to have some start date, as opposed to inheriting faith from a parent or grandparent. We all need to make a personal decision for or against Christ. But beyond that consideration, a more important question is 'what' is the nature of your faith experience right now? Are you today practicing intentional Christianity? Is your daily experience of God a life that is bound in obedience to the Word and the person of Jesus Christ? It's not about using particular words to describe the point in time of coming to Jesus -'it's about whether or not you are seeking to follow Jesus in your life today.

There is small creature in nature called the star-nosed mole, He is blind, deaf and olfactory-challenged, that is, blind, deaf and he doesn't smell all that well. He burrows into the soggy wetlands of North America in search of food. With out-turned claws, he forages the earth for breakfast -3, tasty grub perhaps, or a creamy caterpillar larva. How does he survive? God gave this little guy eleven pairs of pink, fleshy projections encircling a large snout. He can't smell anything with it but as an instrument of touch it transcends the human hand. The star of this little guy's snout contains 25,000 minute sensory receptors and 100,000 never fibers (compared to l7,000 on the human hand). His ability to detect trouble? Superb. His ability to determine something nourishing versus something toxic? Excellent.

God gives each one of us the ability to thrive in the world. Though I committed my life to Jesus in 1971, it has not been so long that I can't remember how unprepared I felt to survive, let alone thrive, in the world before coming to know Jesus. Yet, for many years after my conversion, and for most of my years as a pastor, I somehow passed by the many passages of Scripture that deal with the full and exciting life in Christ that is offered to his people. Supernaturally supercharged spiritual gifts.

Healings. Signs and wonders. All the good stuff of the Bible that is so very present in even a casual reading, all of this is part of the gift package we are given to be able to thrive in an often dark, soggy world.

Paul's conversion was dramatic, spectacular. Mine wasn't. I sat in a room in my parent's home late at night when I was 19 and gave my life over to Jesus. He had been working with me, working on me, for over a year, at least in my consciousness, and I knew the way of Jesus to be the way of truth, but I had not yet made a commitment, I had not yet said, 'I invite you in.' So that's what I did that night, as I recall in early July of the summer of '71, at the end of my freshman year at the university .Though I felt the warmth of Jesus rush in, and tremendous assurance, and if you will the presence of the Holy Spirit, I saw no blinding flash of light, and was not directed to go to anyone's house for an additional revelation.

Over the years, I have met people who have had Paul's experience, or some dramatic variation, and others who have had my experience, or some not-so-dramatic variation. Both are legitimate calls to salvation. But, you see, for any and for all of us, conversion is the beginning of the Christ-based journey, not the final destination. In fact, I have come to understand that calls of conversion are really stories about vocation -someone is being called for some godly work. And, to extend it a bit, conversions are also stories about the gifts of God.

God is the chief actor in the Scripture, and the chief actor in our lives as well. Conversion isn't the result of skillful leadership by the community or even of persuasive preaching or biblical interpretation. In many biblical accounts, such as those of Philip's work with the Ethiopian, the mysterious hand of God directs everything. In other stories, such as that of Peter and Cornelius, the church must be dragged kicking and screaming into the movements of God. Conversion seems to be a surprising, unexpected act of divine grace. And the converted always get to vocation, to the doing of ministry, and to do ministry effectively, the converted utilize the gifts of the Spirit given for just this purpose. Conversion leads to vocation which leads to the appropriation of spiritual gifts. 'And most of ministry is a slow and steady affair.

Still, even though Paul's story may not be the only way to Christ, it remains a sort of paradigm, a good example of what can happen when someone is radically confronted and changed by Christ. So, we need to attend to the drama of Paul's experience, not because we would repeat the means, but because the end is important, that is, the end of being radically confronted and changed by Christ.

Years ago, a Johns Hopkins University professor gave a group of graduate students this assignment: go the slums. Take 200 boys between the ages of 12 and 16, and investigate their background and environment. Then predict their chances for the future. After consulting social statistics, talking to the boys and compiling much data, the students concluded that 90% of the boys would spend some time in jail. Twenty-five years later, another group of graduate students was given the job of testing the prediction. They went back to the same area. Some of the boys -by then men - were still there, a few had died, some had moved away, but they got in touch with 180 of the original 200. They found that only four of the group had ever been sent to jail.

Why was it that these men, who had lived in a breeding place of crime, had such a suprisingly good record? The researchers were continually told: "Well, there was a teacher. ..." They pressed further and found that in 75% of the cases, it was the same woman. So the researchers went to this woman, now living in a home for retired teachers, and asked her how she had exerted

this remarkable influence over that group of children? Could she give them any reason why these boys should have remembered her?

"No,' she said, "no, I really couldn't." And then, thinking back over the years, she said musingly, more to herself than to her questioners: "I loved those boys."

That's what it's like to be radically confronted and changed by Jesus Christ. Part of it maybe a discovery about who we really are, and that part may be painful for us, but most of it is the incredible, amazing, unbelievable disclosure that despite what we may have done, we are loved by Jesus. When you are touched with that love -from him -you will never be the same again. What's left is the rest of eternity, to live and to follow the vocation set out for you, to do ministry, and to become empowered by the gifts of the Spirit.

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